Personal Professional Development and The Holistic Massage Therapist

Personal professional development begins with a commitment to become the best massage therapist that you can be. It involves striving for excellence in your initial training and in continued education and training throughout your career as a massage therapist. It is most successful when planned in a thoughtful and conscious way.

I would like to suggest that in our personal professional development strategies, massage therapists accept the idea of being holistic practitioners—not "holistic" in the common use of the term with focus on the client as a whole person, but with new meaning and focus on the massage therapists themselves.

This new concept of holistic practice would focus on practitioners themselves using all of their various abilities and skills in their approach to a client, i.e., the "whole" massage therapist. This would mean that massage therapists should use physical skill in applying techniques while using intuitive information backed up with intellectual understanding of how the human organism functions, and applied in the context of caring and ethical behavior.

To fragment the practitioner is just as limiting to the practice of massage therapy as to fragment the client. Individually, this means that each of us should look at professional development as a process of improving each aspect of the abilities and skills utilized in our work as massage therapists.

The most basic skills needed by a massage therapist are hand techniques. All of the knowledge and intuition in the world won't deliver a good massage, or even a massage that feels good, without skilled hands. Such skilled hands are developed through watching a proficient and experienced teacher, receiving massage therapy from skilled practitioners, and practice, practice, practice.

But such practice is not enough for full professional development. As the historian Elting Morison points out, "practice supported only by the knowledge obtained from practice, tends to stay in the same place." He further observes that "refinements of technique—of ways of doing things—may appear to be, and sometimes are, dramatic improvements in that state of the art, but fundamental advances derive only from increases in the amount of information available."

Information for the massage therapist comes from both the intellect and the more elusive faculty of intuition. Neither can be neglected without diminishing the potential of the practitioner.

Two extreme positions can be found in the field today, i.e., those that claim that intuition is enough to practice good massage therapy, and those who dismiss intuitive knowledge in support of intellectual knowledge based on either scientific or empirical evidence. Either extreme fails to see massage therapists as whole persons who must use all of their faculties to fulfill their highest professional potential.

Intuition is a faculty of human beings which is not yet very clearly understood, but which plays a large part in all human endeavors whether we are aware of it or not. It has been defined as "direct knowing without conscious reasoning."

I think that some of the "intuition" massage therapists speak of can be traced to a "direct knowing" through the sense of touch. It is a kind of kinesthetic knowledge that doesn't necessarily get to a conscious level but which offers great amounts of useful information which we are acting on without being consciously aware of it.

This is the kind of knowledge that is developed through practice and letting go of conscious effort while performing massage. There is a subtle process of performance, response and feedback that happens on a kinesthetic level and which is hampered by focused thinking about what the therapist is doing.

This is part of the "art" in the art and science of massage therapy, i.e., the skillful application of massage using this kinesthetic-intuitive information. This is why, generally speaking, the longer a massage therapist has been in practice and the more massage performed, the better the quality of touch sensitivity and therefore the "feel" of the massage.

But practitioners are still not performing to full potential without intellectual knowledge of both the nature of the person (mind/body) they are touching, and the effects that their touch will have. This intellectual knowledge is best acquired through listening to teachers, reading and engaging the mind with the material presented. The mind will then sort out what is useful and true.

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Intellectual knowledge of such things as the origins and insertions of muscles, physiological effects of certain techniques or the relationship of mind-body functioning may or may not be used at a conscious level during a massage. But this knowledge has been acquired and stored in the brain, and is available for use by the non-conscious mind when needed. I would suspect that the intuitive or "non-conscious" application of massage is greatly enhanced by the amount of stored intellectual knowledge there is available to the practitioner.

It is also true that we make conscious decisions and plans which are based on evaluations and judgments founded on whatever information is available to us. The more conscious information available, the better informed those decisions and plans will be. Intellectual knowledge is used by the mind to do its part in this total process of performing massage therapy.

Physical skill, intuition and intellectual knowledge should be applied in the context of caring and ethical behavior. Caring comes from the heart, and caring behavior is exhibited in speech and manner. A caring practitioner always holds the client's welfare as the highest value.

Ethical behavior is related to caring, because if we care for our clients, we will behave ethically towards them. Massage therapists are just beginning serious dialog about what ethical behavior is, i.e., professional, sexual and business ethics.

Ethical behavior in a professional setting must be learned. Since school curricula are so varied, and so many massage therapists have entered the field in ways other than formal schooling, the discussion of ethical behavior is an important one for professional development and continuing education. It is a topic that has been generally neglected in favor of more "practical" matters like technique.

It is no less important to be ethical in practice than to give an effective massage. In fact it is more important, because unethical behavior inevitably hurts other people and damages the image of our profession. Understanding and practice of ethical professional behavior is a key component of the personal professional development of massage therapists. Therefore, it deserves serious study and attention.

So here is the picture of the holistic practitioner—skillful with their hands, intuitive, knowledgeable, caring and ethical. To accomplish the task of becoming this holistic massage therapist requires years of thoughtful practice and continued study and learning. It is a lifetime career challenge. Isn't it a challenge worth accepting?

Patricia J. Benjamin
National Director of Education
Chicago, Illinois